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Reagan Denies Overreact To Report of Libyan Ass

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WASHINGTON, Dec. 17 — President Reagan dismissed suggestions today that his Administration had overreacted to reports of threats from Libyan assassination teams, saying that "the threat was real" and that it was based on information from several sources.

Mr. Reagan, speaking at a news conference, said it would be "very foolish" to relax recently increased security measures. "I can only tell all of you that our information on this entire matter has come from not one, but several, widespread sources," the President said. "We have complete confidence in it."

Mr. Reagan denied that he or his aides had been the initial source for articles on assassination teams. He said, "The news, claiming leaks from unidentified sources, made it public at a time when we had held this entire matter confidential for a long time because we believed that we had a better opportunity of apprehending any terrorists or terrorist squads if it was not made public. And so we're sorry that it was."

Americans Asked to Come Home

Last week, partly in response to the reported threat of assassination teams, the White House banned travel by Americans to Libya and advised all Americans living there to leave. A senior Administration official said the measures were aimed at ending the "current lawless behavior" of Muammar el-Qaddafi, the Libyan leader.

Mr. Reagan's remarks today came amid rising skepticism in the press and some Government quarters about the severity of Libyan assassination threats and Administration comments about it.

Former President Jimmy Carter said recently that he had been a subject of similar threats while in office but had avoided public comment. Senior Administration officials acknowledged that doubts had arisen about the existence of "hit teams," but said the questions were inevitable, given the alarming yet elusive nature of the threat.

They Says Leaks Were Haphazard

These officials added that, to the best of their knowledge, the first information was disclosed to the press without White House authorization. They said that information had slipped out haphazardly, probably from investigative agencies where officials were familiar with some

Since the first articles about assassination teams appeared earlier this month, there has been a major increase in security for the President and top Government officials. Many senior Administration officials, including the President, have commented on the threat in public gatherings, emphasizing its seriousness.

Last week, Federal agencies circulated descriptions and sketches described as composite drawings of five terrorists, warning senior Government officials to study the sketches, according to several officials familiar with the drawings. At the same time, the State Department cabled a detailed account of the threat to embassies.

Yet little information about the threat itself and sources of information about it has been made public. Federal officials who say they are familiar with details frequently contradict one another when questioned. The result, officials acknowledge, has been wide confusion.

Wednesday, for example, Senator Howard H. Baker Jr., the Senate Majority Leader, said that the threat from assassination teams had diminished. Within hours, David Gergen, the White House director of communications, denied Senator Baker's statement.

Mr. Reagan also took issue with it today. The President said he understood that Senator Baker "did not have any intelligence information that would give rise to such a statement."

Meanwhile, some officials at the Federal Bureau of Investigation, one of the agencies responsible for finding and apprehending terrorists, said earlier this week that the entire matter had been exaggerated. These officials, who asked not to be identified, said that none of the intelligence information about any teams had been confirmed. "It's been blown way out of proportion," said one.

Interviews with officials at the F.B.I., the Secret Service, White House and United States intelligence agencies suggests that a serious threat exists at core of the assassination-team report, but that it has spawned a series of unplanned reactions and exaggerations, both by the Administration and the press.

After Jet Fight Off Libya

The first indication that Libya might dispatch assassination teams to try to kill President Reagan and other American officials came early in September, shortly after American pilots shot down two Libyan jets off Libya, according to senior Administration officials. Intelligence reports received from the Middle East said that Colonel Qaddafi had issued orders to train and equip assassination teams.

Initially, according to Administration officials, these reports were discounted because the plans seemed so audacious and reckless. But when the American Ambassador to Italy, Maxwell M. Rabb, was reported to be a target of a Libyan assassination team in October, and an American diplomat in Paris barely escaped an attack in November that officials thought involved Libya, concern heightened.

Informers in Africa Reported

Then in the middle of November, law enforcement officials said, an informer came forward in Africa and told American intelligence agencies that he had taken part in training assassination teams in Libya, and had first-hand information that they were on their way to the United States.

Since then, according to senior Administration officials, the informer has been the central source of information, providing descriptions that were used to develop the composite drawings.

There have been other sources, as Mr. Reagan said today, but none has offered the kind of detailed information provided by the informer, officials said. In fact, many sources have provided misleading information, according to officials of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. "We've been deluged with tips," said a senior official at the bureau earlier this week. "Most have been dead ends."

The informer was flown to the United States later in November, according to Administration officials, and was given lie detector tests by the F.B.I., Secret Service and Central Intelligence Agency. They said he passed all the tests. Those results persuaded officials that the assassination threat was real.